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SENSITIVE
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SUBJECT: CONGO EXPRESS, A NEW AIRLINE FOR THE DRC

¶1. (U) Congo Express was launched on January 25 in association with South African Express, part of South African Airways, and will be based in Lubumbashi, Katanga Province. The new airline will operate a fleet of CRJ200 aircraft and will initially provide domestic connections between Kinshasa, Lubumbashi, and Mbuji-Mayi, with future plans for service to Kisangani and additional cities. Congolese Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) sources confirmed that Congo Express is already registered with the DRC and will begin operations shortly.

¶2. (U) Congo Express will be the first foreign-affiliated carrier to provide regularly scheduled flights between Kinshasa and Lubumbashi, the provincial capital of Katanga, the DRC's most important cobalt and copper mining region and a key driver of economic growth for the country. Many of the DRC's largest foreign investors operating in the mining sector, including U.S. company Freeport-McMoRan, have their mining operations in Katanga. Like the U.S. and other Western embassies in Kinshasa, many multinational companies restrict their expat employees from flying on Congolese-owned and operated airlines. Thus, flying from Kinshasa to Lubumbashi has required flying non-Congolese airlines, such as Kenya Airways or South African Airways, both of which necessitated transiting through a foreign country.

¶3. (SBU) Belgian airline SN Brussels has also requested permission to operate domestic flights in the DRC, initially focused on the Kinshasa-Lubumbashi route. In response, the CAA told SN Brussels that it would be required to create a DRC-registered company before permission is granted, according to Article 7 of Chapter 2 of the Convention on International Civil Aviation of 1944 (the Chicago Convention). As of January 2010, SN Brussels has still not decided whether to create a DRC-registered company and has not therefore received authorization from the CAA to begin domestic service. (Note: Econcouns was told by a contact at the Belgian Embassy that SN Brussels would also require infrastructure upgrades to Lubumbashi airport before they would consider flights to/from Lubumbashi. End note).

¶4. (SBU) Comment: The Embassy's prohibition on the use of Congolese-owned and operated airlines by employees under COM authority has made more frequent travel to many key provinces in the DRC difficult. The creation of Congo Express will offer a convenient solution for embassy personnel who would like to travel within the DRC. Foreign companies operating in Katanga and other key provinces will no doubt also welcome this new option for in-country commercial flights. End comment.
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